

Daily Herald, April 3, 2004

Lake County officials celebrated Friday the inclusion of local road projects in the U.S. House's newly approved transportation bill.

The legislation, overwhelmingly approved by a 357-65 vote that morning, provides funding for several area efforts, including \$8 million to reconstruct and widen the Route 60 bridge over the Tri-State Tollway near Lake Forest.

Also included is \$3.36 million to widen a stretch of Washington Street in Gurnee, \$500,000 for electronic signs that would warn motorists of traffic delays along Lake-Cook Road and \$480,000 for new turn lanes and traffic signals on Midlothian Road at Lake Zurich High School's entrance.

The legislation still faces two hurdles: reconciliation with the Senate's transportation plan and uncertainty from the White House. Even so, local leaders are excited that the county may benefit from the package.

"This really helps us," said Lake County Board chairwoman Suzi Schmidt, whose agency vigorously lobbied for local roads to be incorporated into the bill. "It gets some projects done that we could never do on our own."

Congress's next transportation bill will fund roadwork and mass-transit projects through 2009 across the nation. It will replace a \$218 billion plan that covered projects completed between 1998 and 2003.

The House's legislation would provide \$217.4 billion for highways, \$51.5 billion for mass transit and about \$6 billion for safety and research programs.

Illinois would receive about \$7.1 billion for highway projects as part of the bill, an increase of 28 percent from the last federal transportation plan. The state would receive about \$2.6 billion for mass-transit efforts, an increase of 31 percent.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk singled out House Speaker Dennis Hastert of Yorkville and U.S. Rep. Bill Lipinski of Chicago for ensuring Illinois was well represented in the bill.

"This really shows the political muscle of the Illinois delegation," said Kirk, a Highland Park Republican. "It reverses our status from being a donor state to being a recipient state."

The Senate has passed its own \$318 billion plan. The House legislation will now go to a House-Senate conference, back to both chambers for final votes and then to President Bush's desk.

Citing the need for fiscal restraint because of mounting federal budget deficits, the White House has opposed both of the House and Senate bills. It has even cautioned that the legislation could produce Bush's first veto.

The White House has proposed a \$256 billion spending plan.

U.S. Rep. Phil Crane, a Wauconda Republican, said he is confident that the House and Senate can reconcile the two bills into one proposal. As for the president, Kirk said he believes Friday's sizable victory shows that, if needed, there are enough votes in the House to override a presidential veto.

Support from two-thirds of the House, or 290 votes, is needed for such a maneuver.

"This was a veto-proof majority," Kirk said.

His assurances came as a relief to county board members concerned about a potential veto.

"We certainly need all the money we can get for road-improvement projects," said board member Diana O'Kelly, who leads the public works and transportation committee. "If he feels confident that the money is going to come here, it's going to."

- The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Projects: Bush threatens to veto legislation